CHAPTER FOUR

SEYSSEL AND ITALY: A SCHOLAR LOOKS AT WAR

In 1503 the Spanish general Gonsalvo da Cordova set a trap for the French army in a battle near Cerignola in southern Italy. The innovative commander dug a ditch and filled it with stakes. Heavy infantry stood their ground behind it, and behind them Gonsalvo placed a contingent of gunmen armed with harquebuses, or sixteenth-century muskets. The duke of Nemours led the French army, and as he charged ahead, the renowned French cavalry immediately fell into the ditch. The duke, left unprotected, was shot and killed by gunfire. Taken by surprise and leaderless, the French army fell into disarray and found themselves surrounded by the rearguard of the Spanish cavalry. It was a major disaster for the French, whose army would be crushed definitively in southern Italy a few months later by Gonsalvo at the battle of Garigliano.\(^1\) One contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, contrasted the innovative strategy of Gonsalvo with the retrograde and undisciplined French army. Of the French in battle, he stated, “As is their nature when they meet opposition, they became disorderly and began to move about in all directions; whereupon the very capable Gonsalvo, recognizing his opportunity, attacked and utterly defeated them.”\(^2\) Another contemporary commented that the battle of Cerignola was won neither by the courage of the troops, nor by the tenacity of the general, but by a little ditch, some earth, and the harquebus.\(^3\) In many of the battles in the Italian wars, bravery no longer seemed to matter. The ever greater emphasis on strategy, discipline, and technology appeared to eclipse hundreds of years of medieval military tradition.

The account of the battle of Cerignola illustrates the context of Claude de Seyssel’s military thought. The era of the knight on horseback had come to a close; he had been replaced by well-trained and

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\(^3\) Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century*, 54.
well-disciplined infantrymen with firearms. Modern observers might see changes in military strategy from the point of view of new technology, but Seyssel and his contemporaries often ignored technical explanations. For them, problems with the French military stemmed from one essential cause: a lack of order and discipline. The theme of order pervaded the Monarchie de France. Order was the secret of both police, the administrative and social organization of the realm, and force, the ability to overcome enemies on the battlefield, conquer new territories, and maintain them in submission. Seyssel’s opinions on war were central to the larger picture of his life, thought, and identity. With his noble background, first-hand experience, and knowledge of ancient scholarship, he strove to provide answers to the military crisis confronting Louis XII in the years 1513–1515. An analysis of his military thought indicates that the foundation of his constitutional thought was a desire for order. His practical concern was to increase the strength and advantage, or force, of the French army on the battlefield and the effectiveness of the French monarchy in managing an occupying force.

Whether or not the Italian wars were the crucible of modern warfare has been a matter of debate among military historians. Clearly,

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4 The only work dedicated exclusively to Seyssel’s treatment of war is an article by Jean-François Pernot, “Le rôle de la guerre dans le développement de la théorie de la monarchie moderne” in Revue historiques des armées, 3 (1979), 40–70. Pernot focuses on Seyssel’s ideas in books III, IV, and V of the Monarchie as a reflection of the newly created nation-state.

5 The idea of a ‘military revolution’ appeared as the thesis of Michael Roberts in 1955, which maintained that in the years 1560–1660, a professional and permanent military establishment emerged resulting in the concentration of state power in the hands of absolute sovereigns. His evidence focused on the army of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Geoffrey Parker modified the military revolution thesis by expanding the era of innovation to include the Italian wars of the late fifteenth century. He focused on the impact of gunpowder and the trace italienne form of fortification as pivotal in the development of larger armies and subsequent state formation. Recently this thesis has come under attack by historians such as Jeremy Black and Bert Hall who claim that the thesis has put too much emphasis on the evolution of technology instead of on social and political factors in the changing nature of warfare. Both stress the development of the modern military as a long term phenomenon. Black sees the eighteenth century as more important in the history of warfare, but also questions whether it is appropriate to describe any transformation that lasts more than a century as a revolution. For an overview of the debate, see Jeremy Black, A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society 1550–1800 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1991), 1–7, 93–96. Bert Hall’s perspective appears in Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe: Gunpowder, Technology, and Tactics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 200–235. The classic text on the military revolution is Geoffrey Parker’s The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West. The second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) includes an afterward in defense of the military revolution thesis, 155–175.